

BELL TOLLS FOR POPULISM

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CRISIS IN IRISH SOCCER

WHERE TO NOW FOR THE 'WORST SQUAD IN HISTORY'?

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Michael D: Ireland is 'playing with fire' in 'dangerous drift' toward Nato

• **On Nato:** says that the country is 'burying itself in other people's agendas'

• **Critical:** hits out at Tánaiste's security forum, asking 'where are the neutral countries?'

• **'Despondent':** says that decline of the UN represents an 'incredible failure' of diplomacy

EXCLUSIVE

BY BARRY J WHYTE

Ireland is "playing with fire" during a dangerous period of "drift" in its foreign policy and must avoid "burying ourselves in other people's agendas", President Michael D Higgins has said.

In an exclusive interview with the *Business Post*, President Higgins has given a strongly-worded warning about deviating from Ireland's traditional policy of "positive neutrality".

He said that the country finds itself in a particularly acute moment, noting that "the most dangerous moment in the articulation and formulation of foreign policy and its practice, since the origin of diplomacy, has been when you're drifting and not knowing what you're doing."

He added, "I would describe our present position as one of drift."

Ireland's traditional policy of neutrality is currently under review, with a four-day debate over the country's foreign policy set to begin at the Government's Consultative Forum on International Security Policy.

The panel is set to discuss a number of issues about Ireland's international relations, including the country's long-standing tradition of military neutrality and the possibility of membership of Nato.

President Higgins said that Ireland should avoid the "strutting and chest thumping" of those who would espouse a "hold-me-back version of Irish policy", and who would want Ireland to "march at the front of the band" into military alliances such as Nato.

"We're better than that," he said, adding that Irish foreign policy should be based on the country's tradition of international cooperation.

The country must avoid abandoning Ireland's right to belong to any group that it chooses in relation to non-militaristic international policy, he said.

In relation to the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy, he said that the composition of the various panels was mostly made up of "the admirals, the generals, the airforce, the rest of it", as well as "the formerly neutral countries who are now joining Nato".

He asked why there was no representation from still-neutral countries such as Austria and Malta.

He was critical, too, of the European Union for its increasing military posturing, citing French president Emmanuel Macron's recent comments that "the future of Europe is as the most reliable pillar in Nato".

He said, "any time that Ireland puts itself behind the shadows of previous empires



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within the European Union it loses an opportunity of expanding and enhancing and using its influence for the world".

The President was speaking in the context of a wider analysis of the need for reform of the United Nations, which he has on several occasions described as the foundation of Ireland's foreign policy.

Tánaiste Micheál Martin has rejected claims that the list of speakers at the consultative forum was "biased and one-sided" in favour of "pro-Nato witnesses." Martin described this as "outrageous carry on."

He said that the consultative forum will have "a plurality of views" and that it does not have a pre-deter-

mined outcome. President Higgins was 'despondent' in relation to the decline of the United Nations, which he said was the result of "an incredible failure of diplomacy and failure of commitment to the United Nations" and "should never have come to this point", he said.

The future of the UN, he said, lay in the countries of Africa, South America and Asia rather than Europe, because "some of its principal partners are too heavily involved in undermining it".

"I think the change that will represent the population of the world, the best prospect in relation to globalisation, the best prospect in relation to climate change, in relation to migration, in relation to all of these issues, is

going to come from that side," he said.

Ireland, through its foreign policy, ought to engage in "a

more inclusive, deeper, more wide ranging, more self-confi-

dent [foreign policy], not just in consultation with the fading imperial powers, but with the emerging populations of the world," he said.

Ireland's freedom to join any group that could "break the impasse of the decline of the United Nations has to be incredibly important", he said.

President Higgins also expressed reservations about further investment in the Irish Defence Forces while it had yet to resolve the cultural issues revealed by an independent review group which found substantial institutional problems with sexual misconduct, bullying, discrimination, and career obstruction.

"I have to say I am absolutely heartbroken at the fact that people have had to wait for justice," he said in relation to the findings.



Clueless about credit

Sarah McGuinness: the rising perils of 'buy now, pay later' apps **Personal Finance, page 22**

Intel warns high cost of energy may put off potential investors

BY DONAL MACNAMEE

Intel has repeatedly warned the government that the high cost of energy could make the country less attractive as a destination for investment, the *Business Post* has learned.

The computer chip-making giant, which is the country's largest employer with more than 5,000 staff, has said Ireland's energy costs are putting the country at a "competitive disadvantage" for production compared with the US.

The warnings from Intel come after Boldden plc, the owner of Tara Mines, cited high energy costs as part of the reason for its halting production at the Co Meath mine

and temporarily laying off 650 workers. Electricity prices in Ireland are among the most expensive in Europe, with the energy system still heavily reliant on imported coal and natural gas to power generation plants.

IDA Ireland, the state's inward investment agency, last year wrote to the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities warning that Ireland's creaking energy system was "increasingly viewed as expensive, unpredictable and relatively high risk" by foreign companies.

This newspaper understands that Intel's engagement with the government in recent months focused heavily on energy issues, with the technology giant warning Ireland's "long-term reputation and competitiveness" could be impacted when it came to future investments.

The US company said it was also increasingly concerned

about the vulnerability of Ireland's power system as the number of security of supply warnings on the grid had increased dramatically in recent years.

A person familiar with the discussions added that the company had given "very real consideration" to slowing down production at its Leixlip plant when energy costs were at their peak earlier this year.

Documents released to this newspaper under Freedom of Information show lobbyists at Intel have persistently raised the issue of energy costs with senior officials in recent months.

In February, during a private conversation with Declan Hughes, now secretary-general of the Department of Enterprise, Hendrik Bourgeois, Intel's vice-president for European policy affairs, said the issue was impacting Ireland's competitiveness.

According to records of the

meeting, he "noted that continued elevated energy prices are placing the EU and Ireland at a competitive disadvantage for chip production versus facilities in the US".

On March 30, he discussed the same issue with Matt Lynch, special adviser to Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, seeking an update on the government's Ukraine Enterprise Crisis Scheme - a programme to help businesses hit by energy price hikes due to Russia's war on Ukraine.

Intel also raised the issue with Dr Orlaigh Quinn, the former secretary-general at the Department of Enterprise, when she visited its Leixlip campus in March.

The issue was less pressing now, a source said, given that wholesale energy prices had come down, but they added that Intel was still concerned that the security of Ireland's energy supply was "quite vulnerable".

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“Ireland must not drift into Nato and become buried in other people’s agendas”



In an exclusive interview with **Barry J Whyte**, President Michael D Higgins warns against any move towards military alliances, which distracts from leading on global crises



Ireland is in a dangerous period of “drift” in relation to its foreign policy, President Michael D Higgins has told the *Business Post*, adding that “we don’t have to bury ourselves in other people’s agendas”.

President Higgins said: “The most dangerous moment in the articulation and formulation of foreign policy and its practice, since the origin of diplomacy, has been when you’re drifting and not knowing what you’re doing.” He added, “I would describe our present position as one of drift.”

He said Ireland’s foreign policy was one of “positive neutrality, and it can be defined very simply as Ireland’s right to belong to any group that it chooses in relation to non-militaristic international policy... If you interfere with that, there’s no difference between you and Lithuania and Latvia.”

Both those countries are Nato members. “That’s the fire that people are playing with.”

“The crawl away from the self-esteem of our foreign policy bothers me,” President Higgins said, adding that Ireland’s neutrality was not a myth but a long-running tradition.

Ireland should avoid the “strutting and chest thumping” of those who would espouse a “hold-me-back version of Irish policy”, and who would want Ireland to “march at the front of the band”.

“We’re better than that,” the President said, adding that Irish foreign policy should be based on the country’s tradition of international cooperation.

He said other small countries were “looking to Ireland to give a lead as the country that had a particular history” and had achieved independence and “made the case for peace in its very early speeches after it joined the UN”.

But, he said, “Any time that Ireland puts itself behind the shadows of previous empires within the European Union, it loses an opportunity of expanding and enhancing and using its influence for the world.”

The President was speaking in the context of a wider analysis of the need for reform of the United Nations, which he has on several occasions described as the foundation of Ireland’s foreign policy.

Ireland’s foreign policy position – especially the tradition of neutrality – has been the subject of increasing debate lately. Next week, the government will launch its Consultative Forum on In-

ternational Security Policy, a series of panel discussions set up to generate discussions on our foreign, security and defence policies.

“There’s nothing wrong with people playing parlour games in the winter time,” President Higgins said, “but it’s not a discussion on foreign policy, or global security, the issues that matter,” such as climate change, food insecurity, pandemic preparation, or migration.

He called attention to the composition of the panels, which included “the admirals, the generals, the air force, the rest of it”, as well as “the formerly neutral countries who are now joining Nato”.

“What about Austria? What about Malta, who are still on the security council? Why aren’t they there?”

“And the person who’s in charge of this is a person with a very large DBE – Dame of the British Empire,” he said, referring to political scientist Louise Richardson. “I think it’s grand, but, you know, I think

President Michael D Higgins: ‘angry’ about abuses in the Defence Forces
Fergal Phillips

that there were a few candidates I could have come up with myself.”

President Higgins also expressed concerns that any future investment in the Irish Defence Forces might come before a raft of necessary reforms to the organisation – a necessity exposed by a succession of studies and reports on bullying, misogyny and violence within the them.

“We haven’t put in place any guarantees yet to say that when we invite young women and men to join to serve Ireland we will offer you a career in which you will be treated with dignity, you will be upskilled, and when you decide to leave, you will be a person with confidence,” he said.

“I have to say I am absolutely heartbroken at the fact that people have had to wait for justice.”

He added, “I cannot for the life of me see how I can be asked to equate an internal set of mechanisms within a military

structure as if it was the equivalent of a civil structure,” describing it as “redolent of the argument that used to be made about canon law and civil law”.

He described himself as “angry with what had happened within the Defence Forces. That’s unfinished business with me. I think it won’t wait”.

President Higgins said that “Ireland should be looking at the spaces in which it could be of assistance in relation to restoring vigorous responsible international institutions” rather than “half-baked, fear-induced presentations that might or might not be empirically based”.

He also warned against military alignments that would result in “disqualifying ourselves as an open-minded participant in relation to the real issues that matter”.

He dismissed the argument that Ireland is a small country that is not a member of any military alliance.

“Is that supposed to be a weakness?” he said. “Who decided it was a weak-

Decades of underinvestment have left this cou

Can we really say that we are neutral when the RAF patrols our skies?

Barry J Whyte speaks to security and defence experts about how vulnerable Ireland is, and what ought to be done

In February 2022, the Commission for the Defences Forces – a body set up to assess the adequacy of Ireland’s military – offered the government a Goldilocks solution: three bowls of porridge of different temperatures. One bowl was the status quo, essentially not investing anything further in the Defence Forces. The second bowl was to increase defence spending by around €500 million over the next six years. And the third was to increase spending by nearly €3 billion.

The government, like Goldilocks, opted for the second option, which was described in the report as ‘Level of Ambition Two’.

Given the context – the Russian invasion of Ukraine, naval manoeuvres in the Irish Sea, the increased cyberattacks on Irish infrastructure, and the attack on the Nord Stream gas pipeline – it has kicked off a debate about the wider question of Irish defence spending, neutrality, and inevitably about the membership of Nato, which has seen applications from previously neutral states such as Finland and Sweden.

With the government’s Consultative Forum on International Security Policy set to begin next week, questions are being raised regarding just how vulnerable Ireland might be, and what ought to be done about it.

Coming against a backdrop of decades of underinvestment in our air and sea defences, and concerns voiced over the failure to stem the tide of resignations from our Defence Forces, at first glance Ireland would appear to be very exposed.

Scott Fitzsimmons, a lecturer in the University of Limerick who specialises in the behaviour of armed forces and the use of force in contemporary conflict, said Ireland’s position as a technologically advanced country, with vital sub-sea telecommunications cables off our shores and dozens of data centres on the

island, made us vulnerable to targeted attacks on infrastructure.

A third of Europe’s data centres are located in Ireland, and three-quarters of the data cables that connect Europe to North America run through or near Irish waters, Fitzsimmons said, all of which could be disrupted by any belligerent party.

“We’re vulnerable in the sense that even if Russia or any other external aggressor, if they had no issue with Ireland itself, if they want to hurt Europe, then they’re going to need to attack Ireland.”

Being alert to and prepared for such assaults required additional defence spending, Fitzsimmons said. That could come in a variety of forms, perhaps primarily on the straightforward matter of better pay and conditions for soldiers to help to retain troops and put the Defence Forces in a position to hire more, if necessary.

“Regardless of one’s political persuasion, I think everyone in Irish politics can agree that the biggest single vulnerability for the Irish Defence Forces is that their pay is really not very good,” Fitzsimmons said. “It is not keeping pace whatsoever with inflation, private sector pay or other aspects of the public sector.”

Ireland doesn’t need a large army, and it certainly doesn’t need an army that replicates, say, the models of the British or US armies, with capabilities in every form of modern warfare. However, it does need better paid soldiers and sailors, and equipment that is specifically focused on the kinds of assault we might experience.

Aerial threats

Fitzsimmons pointed to the critical issue of radar. “We’re really lacking in radar to track aerial threats. We need better maritime surveillance, particularly in the areas of our waters and in

our neighbouring waters where these critical communications data cables run,” Fitzsimmons said.

He also suggested that Ireland could “think about developing a capability in anti-submarine warfare, because that’s the greatest threat to those undersea cables”.

In the air, Ireland might “think about purchasing a relatively small number of jet fighters”, to replace its existing aircraft, which he said were “far too slow to ever catch any would-be attacker; they would just be completely outrun – it’s like someone driving by in an F1 racer and you’re trying to chase them down in your regular car”.

While people like independent TD Cathal Berry have stated that Ireland is “worst in class” in Europe when it comes to our defences, for Fitzsimmons the “dire threats” – meaning invasion by a hostile power – have “a low probability of happening”.

That’s a view shared by Paul Cornish, a former British army officer and security analyst who has been a member of Britain’s chief of the defence staff’s strategic advisory panel and has contributed to the discussions held by the Commission. He believes there are threats to Ireland, but that it’s important to understand what they are.

“If you take a really simple view of vulnerability, then you’d have to say that Ireland is completely and utterly vulnerable: vast coastlines, and you don’t have a massive navy,” he said. “But that’s silly, because it doesn’t take account of real politics and real geopolitics.”

In truth, he said, Ireland was far less vulnerable today than during World War II, when there were active plans by Germany to invade Ireland and use it as a base from which to attack Britain.

“There’s no way we’re going to see Russia or any other sort of naval invasion of the coast of Ireland,” he said.

But that doesn’t mean that Ireland’s Defence Forces are in a state of proper readiness. He said work needed to be done to make sure it could monitor and, if necessary, defend its sea and airspace.

Without targeted investment, Ireland will remain the weakest link in Europe, according to Tom Clonan, an academic, senator and a former captain in the Irish Army.

Clonan, like many others, would have preferred to see the top level of ambition – the third bowl of porridge – in



order to afford aircraft “that are capable of intercepting and monitoring other aircraft in our airspace”.

For him, it’s not simply a matter of military hardware, but the provision of a set of tools to better help us assert our neutrality.

“Can we really say that we are neutral when the RAF patrols our skies? It undermines our status as a neutral country to have a Nato member state doing our patrols for us,” he said.

But more pertinent for Clonan is to identify the real risks facing the Irish state – and develop Defence Forces to cope with it. Ireland, he said, ought not to be preparing for its role in some global conflagration, but rather for the poten-

Ireland needs its soldiers to be better paid
Irish Defence Force

tial for increased security and military consequences from the efforts to create a united Ireland.

“Ireland is not like West Germany and East Germany, we’re more like the Balkans, and it’s going to be very hard for us to control a peaceful transition to whatever this new entity is going to look like.” In years to come we’re going to have to “completely revisit policing, the administration of justice, intelligence, and defence”, he said.

An Garda Síochána will in all likelihood not exist in 20 years’ time, and similarly Óglaigh na hÉireann will have to be reformulated to work in a united Ireland, should it be successfully created.



ness? Which retired general has looked into which crystal ball and which retired admiral who has no sailors any more is in fact seeing in the wind something coming towards him?"

He was also critical of the European Union for its increasing military posturing, citing French president Emmanuel Macron's recent comments that "the future of Europe is as the most reliable pillar in Nato".

"Who is he speaking for?" the President asked, rhetorically.

And he was critical of Ursula von der Leyen's description of Israel as a "model democracy", given the multiple resolutions of the UN which have condemned its illegal settlements.

In relation to the state of the United Nations, President Higgins told the *Business Post* that he was "despondent" about its decline.

He cited a number of instances in which the UN had been undermined in

recent years by the behaviour of some of its permanent Security Council members, such as the abuse of the veto by the US in relation to the Iraq war and what he described as "the scandalous, imperialist invasion – against all humanitarian principles – by Russia of Ukraine".

During Ireland's recent temporary membership of the Security Council, it had proposed a resolution related to climate change's contribution to conflict, which "was vetoed by Russia, disgracefully; but what is not said in reports is that it was also seriously undermined by France".

The current state of the UN was the result of "an incredible failure of diplomacy and failure of commitment to the United Nations" and it "should never have come to this point".

The future of the UN, he said, lay in the countries of Africa, South America and Asia rather than Europe, because "some

of its principal partners are too heavily involved in undermining it".

"I think the change that will represent the population of the world, the best prospect in relation to globalisation, the best prospect in relation to climate change, in relation to migration, in relation to all of these issues, is going to come from that side."

Ireland, through its foreign policy, ought to engage in "a more inclusive, deeper, more wide ranging, more self-confident [foreign policy], not just in consultation with the fading imperial powers, but with the emerging populations of the world," he said.

He called for "an agenda of working in alliance and in tandem for reform of the United Nations with the most peopled parts of the planet".

Ireland's freedom to join any group that could "break the impasse of the decline of the United Nations has to be incredibly important", he said.

Country dangerously exposed



"Whatever the Irish Defence Forces look like, it's going to have to be acceptable to everyone on this island, including the one million-plus people who are very unhappy and fearful about what might happen next," he said, noting the recent eruptions of public disorder in the North, and the threats by some loyalist paramilitaries to come off ceasefire.

"The biggest challenge for Ireland is what happens on this island next, and it's a conversation that's currently not happening," he said.

"If we prepare for it, it could be one of the greatest success stories in Europe. But if we don't prepare for it and if we don't talk about it, it's going to be a catastrophe."

Why neutral Finland, similar in size to Ireland, joined Nato

BY DANIEL MCCONNELL

In April, Finland (population 5.5 million people) formally joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) following Russia's illegal war against Ukraine.

That invasion reminded the Finnish people of their own history.

On November 30, 1939, the then Soviet Union attacked Finland, claiming dishonestly that Finland had provoked the war.

Finland resisted for three months with little outside help.

"Now we must make sure that Ukraine wins their war against Russia – a war defending their independence but also democracy," said Railii Lahnalampi, the Finnish ambassador to Ireland.

Speaking to the *Business Post*, she sought to highlight the similarities between Finland and Ireland.

Both are small open democracies, open economies, and were the only countries of the new states that were born in Europe during and after World War I to remain democratic throughout the 20th century.

Lahnalampi says Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has forced the world to adapt to a new reality. The energy crisis, the food crisis and rising inflation are all of Russia's making, and Finland's application to Nato has been followed with interest in Ireland.

"It has raised questions of why we joined, and why so quickly, and what impact might Sweden's and Finland's Nato membership have on the co-operation of the non-aligned states in the EU framework. The reality is that in Europe we have moved from cooperative security (Helsinki spirit and accords) to defensive security," the ambassador said.

Spheres of influence

Lahnalampi says the background to Finland's application to join Nato must be considered. During the Cold War, Finland's position between east and west was not easy. Like Ireland, the country was very active in international organisations to prove its independence.

The Soviet Union wanted to have "spheres of influence" – and in order to survive, Finland pursued a policy of neutrality. Neutrality was a policy tool, not so much an ideological doctrine.

Finland's decision to join the EU in 1995 was mainly for security reasons as the EU was – and is – seen as a security community, she said.

"And since our membership in the EU we have not considered ourselves neutral, given the EU obligation, including the 42:7 mutual defence clause."

The Finnish defence forces' wartime strength is 280,000 soldiers with a 900,000 reserve, and a defence budget of about €6.1 billion this year.

This compares to total defence spending in Ireland of €1.1 billion, with the total number of active Defence Forces personnel at 7,987 in February.

Joining Nato was not done in haste. Finns understood early this year that the situation in Europe had changed fundamentally due to the Russian policy of spheres of influence, readiness to use brutal force, and its invasion of Ukraine. "We understood that Russia's actions affect us, the whole Europe and beyond," the ambassador said.

"The public, because they were well versed in the details of what was happening, were ahead of the politicians on the issue of joining Nato."

The decision to apply for Nato membership marked a fundamental change in Finland's security policy and history. When Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, Finnish citizens and decision-makers drew the necessary conclusions.

The decision to join Nato had the support of 188 members of parliament out of 200 – only eight voted against – and is a logical step given the country's historical experience and its geography.

Finland also insists its Nato membership will be part of its foreign and security policy, not the other way round, and that the EU remains the main reference framework for the country's foreign policy.

Comment

There's nothing righteous about spending less on protecting your citizens



Lucinda Creighton

The time is coming when Ireland will need to be a part of formalised defence arrangements with either the EU or Nato

Ireland has for many years operated a policy of neutrality that is largely based on fantasy and self-delusion when it comes to the country's international reputation.

Many Irish people, particularly elected members of Dáil Éireann, regularly speak with pride about how widely respected Ireland is on the international stage because of our policy of neutrality. The narrative suggests that other countries look upon Ireland as some sort of superior moral force, more righteous than our friends and neighbours who engage in the grubby business of protecting their borders and their people.

Of course the idea that Ireland is widely respected for adopting a position of isolation and opting to rely on the protection of other countries because we cannot be bothered to spend our own resources, is a fallacy. There is nothing righteous about starving your Defence Forces of resources and spending less on protecting your citizens than almost any other developed nation on the planet.

Ireland should not preach to others about this abdication of duty. Rather we should set about addressing the shortfall and begin to discuss security and defence on this island in a mature way.

Not only is our policy of neutrality not a cause of great admiration abroad, the policy itself is something of a fantasy. Despite promulgating our status regularly on the world stage, Ireland is not neutral – far from it. In fact when it comes to Ireland's voting record at the UN general assembly, our position is abundantly clear as we vote consistently with the United States on all manner of security and defence matters.

We were not neutral during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, when Shannon Airport was used as a stopover base for US troops. Nor have we been neutral when we supported a European and Nato response to the Balkans war, the Russian invasion of Georgia or indeed more recently, the invasion of Ukraine. Ireland is firmly aligned with western powers.

It is far more accurate to say that Ireland is impotent from a security and defence perspective. We have no capacity to help ourselves in the event of a military incident or attack. This has always been a concern, but more so today as the post World War II order has definitively ended.

The celebrated Irish civil servant TK Whitaker is known to have suggested that Ireland "took a gamble on peace". This gamble worked out for a time, as Europe has been relatively peaceful since the end of the war. The fact that Ireland opted out of any alliances or mutual defence agreements, and utterly failed to invest in its own defence capabilities is not the reason why it has avoided any direct conflict or security situations (besides that in the North). Rather, Ireland has been lucky that it has been a relatively peaceful period across Europe.

Of course there is more to it than mere luck. The tacit protection of Ireland by the United Kingdom has long been unspoken, but understood here. Having a Nato member, with a well-equipped army, on our doorstep has provided some assurance as to Ireland's defence. It has emerged in recent times that this arrangement is not

just based on neighbourly goodwill, but in fact a formal 'secret' agreement exists between Ireland and Britain. The air defence agreement provides for British patrolling of Irish airspace and dates back to the 1950s. It provides Ireland with some badly needed defence capability and gives some assurance to Britain that it cannot be left entirely exposed to risk by its nearest neighbour, which possesses absolutely no capacity to monitor or intercept hostile aircraft in its skies.

As the security situation in Europe is changing and the nature of warfare becomes almost unrecognisable, Ireland cannot continue to simply sit back and rely on the goodwill of others. The Ukraine war has heralded a new era of security tensions in Europe. We have seen other countries respond to this new reality swiftly. Germany has provided lethal weapons to support Ukraine, breaking with its previous policy. Finland has joined Nato and Sweden will join shortly. Almost every country in Europe has beefed up its military capacity in response to the Russian threat, yet Ireland still ambles along as though it were 1990.

Ireland's status as a hub for US multinational investment also means we are exposed to much greater risk than in the past. We host the European HQs of key global tech companies whose systems, platforms and data centres can all be significant targets for hostile actors.

Likewise, Ireland's position as a key cog in the supply chain of the biggest pharma companies in the world makes the many biopharmaceutical advanced manufacturing sites located here obvious targets in any military or cyberattack. We have also set out plans to develop key energy infrastructure off shore in the Atlantic ocean, but Ireland's ability to defend such infrastructure will be negligible. The days of Ireland free-riding off the security arrangements of Britain and other Nato and EU member states must come to an end. With Moscow engaging in military exercises in Irish waters and engaging in the mobilisation of dissident movements in the North, the threat, as well as our exposure, is at its highest level in almost a century.

In the short term Ireland has to address the pitiful resourcing of our Defence Forces. In 2022, the then defence minister Simon Coveney announced the largest ever increase in the defence budget to 1.5 billion by 2026. The commitment was welcome, but the problem is that we are starting from such a low base. The current Minister, Tánaiste Micheál Martin, has indicated his commitment to providing greater funding for defence purposes, too.

The mindset in government is changing, but as a small country Ireland is limited in terms of what it can do alone. Participating in mutual defence arrangements will be the only way in which we can guarantee the security of our citizens and our infrastructure in the future.

Whether it is through the European Union common defence mechanisms, through bilateral partnerships or through Nato, the time is coming when Ireland will need to be a part of formalised defence arrangements. Irish "neutrality" would then be a thing of the past, had it ever really existed in the first place.